

Remapping the Geopolitics of Terror: Uncanny Urban Spaces in Singapore

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This paper considers urban conflicts as embedded in a range of geopolitical scales. Using post-9/11 Singapore as a case study, it is argued that the barricading of spaces deemed vulnerable to terrorist attack summons layers of historical division, connection, and affiliation—but these do not always include Washington at their geopolitical centre. Instead, urban tensions in Singapore are shaped by the uncanny return of the ghostly past, raising questions about belonging in the multicultural state.

On 28 November 2002, a text message threatening a bomb explosion in the expatriate enclave of Holland Village¹ caused widespread apprehension across Singapore. According to police, who isolated the source of the message within days, a 20-year-old man had initiated the panic. The young man's sister had apparently overheard a conversation about the discovery of a bomb amongst a group of expatriates in a Holland Village restaurant. She reported the conversation to her brother, who then circulated a text message warning his immediate friends. Given the seriousness of the message, and the technological ease of spreading the rumour, it circulated widely—eventually to hundreds of people. When a nearby school alerted police after receiving it, a news release was issued warning against such acts. The release found fear in a

1 Holland Village was established sometime between the late 1930s and 1945 as a military village and served the recreational needs of British soldiers and their families (Chang 1995). When the British repatriated thousands of personnel between 1971 and 1976, it had already become a mainstay for Singaporeans and a new expatriate population.

community still reeling from the Bali blasts of a month earlier, and from government allegations that the Jemaah Islamiyah—an allegedly Al-Qaeda-linked organization with networks across Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines—had been targeting key sites across Singapore for terrorist activities. Despite knowledge that the young man had been mistaken, by the end of the month barricades had been put up along two streets in the area, which were closed to traffic from 6:30pm to 4:00am daily (*Figure 1*). As the months passed, Holland Village became a model for how to protect other sites “catering to Westerners,” such as entertainment districts and hotels.



Figure 1: Barricading of the streets in Holland Village (Photo: © Lisa Law)

Did the bomb hoax represent a collective fear of the possible return of violence to the streets of Singapore? Was it possible that Muslim radicals would attack Western-oriented entertainment districts in capitalist Singapore that had also pledged support for America’s war on terrorism? In a government White Paper released during 2003, details of potential terrorist activities in Singapore were elaborated (Republic of Singapore, 2003). According to “official sources²,” the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) intended to assault a series of American-

2 I use this term cautiously as it is difficult to have confidence in official sources when much of their information is obtained from subjects in detention. For an excellent review of how sources have been cited in academic and related debate, cf. Hamilton-Hart (2005). She argues that “fantasy” and “myopia” characterize much of the field of terrorism studies, and that certain fantasies about Southeast Asian terrorism are based on “uncertain conjecture posing as reliable information” (p. 304).

related interests across the island, including the American, Israeli, and British embassies, commercial buildings housing American companies, and a shuttle bus service used to ferry American military personnel to the Sembawang naval base. The remaining sites focused on Singapore state interests, and included the mass rapid transit system, Changi International Airport, the Ministry and Defence building, and the highly politicized water pipeline between Malaysia and Singapore. By September 2002, the government had arrested 31 persons suspected of being connected to the JI; more would be detained under the Internal Security Act, or placed under restriction orders (National Security Coordination Centre 2004). Their confessions, while in detention, unsurprisingly revealed links to the JI. Detainees also expressed commitment to a vision of Daulah Islamiyah Nusantara (an Islamic state or archipelago) stretching from Indonesia to Thailand and the Philippines, and into which Singapore would ultimately be absorbed.

Holland Village was not mentioned as a potential site of terrorist interest, although the area had recently been touted in the popular press as a “little Bohemia” where lifestyles outside the usual structures of Singaporean society could flourish. Fear of its bombing reflected many ongoing concerns, including a perceived Westernization of Singapore and the erosion of “Asian Values.” Asian Values are a geographically and culturally specific state-sponsored ideology, where the family, community, and broader social order are privileged over individual liberty (Wee 1999). This ideology both enables a distinctive sense of Asian-ness in the postcolonial period, while at the same time decentring the role of religion in a multicultural state. Holland Village represented a site where Asian Values might be compromised, though with potentially contaminating effects. It was for this reason that an entertainment district not specifically targeted for terrorist attack, and where only hearsay fueled fears of danger, became a site of intervention and potential urban conflict.

The last time bombs exploded in Singapore was during the Indonesian Confrontation, or *Konfrontasi*, in the 1960s. During this time, Indonesian radicals infiltrated the streets of Singapore (then part of Malaysia), setting off bombs to generate alarm and stir up latent racial tension. The Confrontation was Indonesian President Sukarno’s initiative to disrupt the new state of Malaysia, which was being crafted out of the remains of the colonial epoch. Many Indonesian leaders regarded the new state as a front for continued British presence in the region and a neo-imperialist plot to expand Malaysia’s borders to include northern Borneo. But President Macapagal of the Philippines and President Sukarno of Indonesia, each conceiving Borneo as belonging to their own territories, had a different vision of a less rigid association of states across the Malay archipelago, which was detailed but never realized in the Manila Accord of 1963. That region was to be called Maphilindo—an

amalgam of Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia—and would symbolize the development of a self-reliant, free, and independent Malay region in Southeast Asia. Maphilindo was doomed to failure, however, as its conception was also embedded in a larger struggle between the superpowers of Britain (Malaysia), America (Philippines), and China (Indonesia). These visions of an allied archipelago would recede for the next decades as the post-colonial boundaries of Southeast Asia took shape.

The recent wave of terrorist detentions, threats of bombings, and dreams of a pan-Islamic state all bear an uncanny resemblance to this tumultuous period of post-colonial history. In 2002, Indonesian President Megawati and Philippine President Arroyo were both in power (and were the daughters of Sukarno and Macapagal, respectively). A modified and more explicitly Islamic version of Maphilindo was being articulated in fresh forms. Suspected terrorists were being detained under Internal Security Acts created during the Cold War to detain what were then understood as communist terrorists, and renewed American interest in the region saw the return of troops in the Philippines and a hasty thawing of relations with Malaysia. This appeared to be an uncanny era in Southeast Asian history: Was America's war on terrorism similar to its earlier war on communism, and thus another imperial project in the region? Or is this resemblance uncanny, in Freud's (1919) more particular sense, in that these eras inhabit each other in recognizable and foreign ways?

The “uncanny,” according to Freud (1919), is resistant to definition, but represents a liminal state between what is familiar (*heimlich*) and unfamiliar (*unheimlich*)—an unstable moment that problematises order. What makes the uncanny unique is not that something familiar suddenly becomes strange, however; it is the way in which the two terms inhabit each other, making one feel “at home” and “unhomely” simultaneously. Because this produces a sense of being involuntarily repetitious, it can also be frightening. Mike Davis (2001), for example, draws on the uncanny to explain the American experience of 9/11, where the threat of global terrorism had been long dreamt about and imagined in Hollywood action films. Images of terrorism, death, and destruction recognizable to American audiences returned to the small screen in disturbingly unfamiliar ways—bringing fear to the streets of American cities. The uncanny also helps explain the experience of terrorism in Southeast Asia, where the contours of being “in place” and “out of place” became unsettled after 9/11. The resurgent vision of an Islamic archipelago introduced old questions of unity and disconnection across postcolonial nation-states, as well as new questions about the role of transnationalism in constructing pan-Islamic identities. These issues of national boundaries and geographies of ethnic and religious identity receded somewhat with the demise of Maphilindo—much as they did when advocated by the Darul Islam during anti-

colonial struggles in the 1940s. Their return in familiar/unfamiliar ways raised specific issues for multicultural, but nevertheless Chinese-dominant, Singapore at a variety of scales. Was Singapore in or out of place in a Muslim archipelago? Could the postcolonial map of Southeast Asia be redrawn by Muslim radicals? Despite decades of official multicultural policy, did Singaporean Muslims identify with the nation or with a pan-Islamic identity? Did Holland Village represent a site where “Asian” and “Islamic” values were in conflict?

Perhaps this moment better represents what Gelder and Jacobs (1998) have characterized as the “postcolonial uncanny,” in that it articulates the uneasy place of the sacred in the postcolonial nation-state. Gelder and Jacobs’ (1998) analysis of Australian Aboriginal land claims enhances our understanding of the uncanny, where notions of belonging/not belonging and “sacredness-in-the-midst-of-modernity” help explain some of the tensions produced in the postcolonial moment. Their work parallels Freud’s own concern with one’s sense of place in a modern world, and examines uncanny experiences arising from the return of spiritual beliefs in the modern, Australian nation-state. Freud himself conceded that the latter were much more frequent, and that many people experience uncanny “feeling[s] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, [and] to the return of [...] spirits and ghosts” (in Gordon 1997:51). The uncanny thus represents a “quality” of feeling, an unsettling recurrence, and, as Gordon (1997:50) suggests, these are often haunting experiences. In Australia it is the return of the ghostly past—i.e. an Aboriginal Australia constructed out of sacred sites—that profoundly unsettles who is “in place” and “out of place” in the contemporary nation. Gelder and Jacobs examine how this remapping of national space overwrites postcolonial boundaries, producing tensions at local, regional, and national scales.

Although Singapore and Australia are very different sites with different issues and colonial histories, the “postcolonial uncanny” helps explain some of the tensions in post-9/11 Southeast Asia. For it is the possibility of a Malay Muslim geopolitical entity, with weighty historical roots, that haunts postcolonial Singapore. This is made all the more real by fragmentation in Indonesia, where there are struggles for greater autonomy in regions such as Aceh and Irian Jaya, and by separatist movements in Thailand and the Philippines. Fears about regional association have been apparent since the Confrontation and Sino-Malay racial riots in the 1960s, which were essentially struggles over the position of Malays (who are still unable to hold sensitive positions in the military, as it is thought their loyalty might be “compromised” in regional disputes). The war on terror has given these fears renewed veracity through media commentary (*Figure 2*), government reports of the JJ’s regional vision (Republic of Singapore 2003), and policy pronouncements that have created Inter-Racial Confidence Circles to encourage inter-communal harmony (Goh

2002). Since independence, the state has devoted enormous political effort to create a multicultural Singapore, whose origins are professed to be rooted in its discovery by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819. Yet in Malay folklore, Singapore was founded in the 14th century by Sang Nila Utama, a Prince of supernatural origins (Miksic and Low 2004). The ruins of the Prince's palace, where his descendants resided until the beginning of this century, have been renovated and made into a museum celebrating Singapore's varied ancestry. In a controversial essay about race relations, Alfian bin Sa'at (2002:386) suggests that the museum erases this royal history, encouraging Malay Singaporeans to surrender their memories for the benefit of racial harmony.

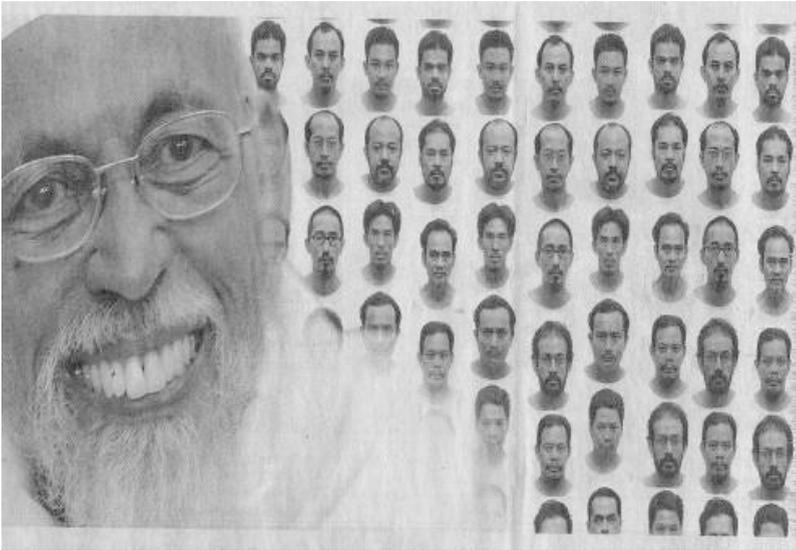


Figure 2: *Jemaah Islamiyah in the media*³

It is the return of this spectre—a Malay world with its own history, geography, and “values”—that is more frightening than the fear of violence itself. It unsettles the boundaries of postcolonial states, raising uncertainties about multicultural coexistence and the place of Singapore's capitalist modernity in Muslim Southeast Asia. In this sense, fears about a Holland Village bombing are as much about a reworked regional vision as they are about the presence of Western expatriates. The remainder of this paper thus chronicles the unset-

3 This photo appeared with an article titled “JI Reloaded: Could it happen?” in *The Straits Times*, 13 December 2003. It depicts Abu Bakar Bashir, spiritual leader of the JI, together with Singaporeans arrested under the Internal Security Act (many photos are repeated). The article expresses the resilience of the network and how “it will try to penetrate Singapore again ... as its goals are long term ... terrorists are eminently patient creatures.”

ting of now established geopolitical entities, as regional knowledge is crucial to understand the barricading of a space not explicitly deemed vulnerable to terrorist attack. First, I explore the “enduring fiction” of Southeast Asia, placing its coherence within a broader context of colonial and imperial aspiration. I examine the uncanny resemblances between the Cold War and the post-9/11 moment, charting the different ways Southeast Asia has been “produced” as a region since the end of WWII. While parallels can be drawn between constructions of the region as “potentially communist” and “radically Islamic,” Washington’s war on terrorism is not really a familiar imperial project in the region. Moving away from Anglocentric versions of Southeast Asia, I then consider broader questions about transnational connections and the hybridity of Southeast Asian capitalisms to illuminate recent events. The resurgent vision of a pan-Islamic archipelago represents one political alternative in a region experimenting with Christian, Islamic, and Confucian traditions. Engaging different regional visions helps explain a more complex global juncture, rather than an era over-determined by the Bush doctrine. It also helps illuminate the encounter with terrorism in the region, and the spectres haunting urban spaces.

The enduring fiction of Southeast Asia

The attacks on America on 9/11, and the subsequent war with Afghanistan, ushered in a new era of terrorist threat in Southeast Asia, as elsewhere. Although Southeast Asian nations universally condemned the horror of 9/11, and expressed this conviction by joining the global campaign against terrorism, American suspicions that the region might become the new “theatre” of transnational terrorist activities were pervasive. Surveillance and intelligence activities initially revealed that the JI had been developing military and economic links with Al-Qaeda since the Soviet-Afghan war in the 1980s. Moreover, the JI was alleged to have been planning attacks on American interests in places like Singapore, as well as envisioning a pan-Islamic state. Before 9/11, terrorist activities had largely been homegrown, religion-based sectarian conflicts directed towards gaining autonomy or independence. Most of these movements found sustenance in the economic and political marginalization of large segments of the population. The discovery of plans to attack the US embassy and other American interests in Singapore, when combined with the shock of the Bali bombings in Indonesia, suggested that new tactics involving Western interests and civilian casualties were being incorporated into the JI agenda. Furthermore, the JI were not the usual suspects: their members, although small in number, were from the educated middle classes.

The unfolding of world events post-9/11 initiated a renewed American interest in the region, heralded by some as the “second front” in Washington’s war on terrorism. The Bush administration sent several hundred troops to the Philippines, softened relations with Malaysia, and some pundits declared Indonesia the next Afghanistan. Southeast Asia is home to the world’s most populous Muslim country, Indonesia, the two Muslim-majority states of Malaysia and Brunei, as well as nations, such as Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines, that have significant Muslim minorities. Although the threat of radical Islam has been evident in Indonesia since President Suharto’s fall in 1998, the suggestion of a more wide-ranging peril is difficult to disentangle from America’s frenzied response to the tragedy of 9/11. Ethnic and religious diversity, comparatively democratic polities, the lack of pan-regional constituencies for radical Islam, and the JI’s own limited ties to other broad-based Islamic groups, have all thwarted the development of a fundamentalist hegemony by any one group in the region (Gershman 2002; Hamilton-Hart 2005). Nevertheless, Southeast Asia emerged in the American geopolitical imagination as a volatile and potentially dangerous Muslim territory in the post-9/11 moment. States such as Singapore, fearing the economic repercussions of not responding to this image, initiated their own anti-terrorist campaigns.

American fears of terrorism, and suspicion of Muslim activities, are reminiscent of the Cold War “domino theory” that led to decades of American involvement in the region. The installation of military bases, the propping up of military dictatorships, and the war in Vietnam were all justified in the name of preventing communism from spreading south, domino style, to nations such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Communist obsessions helped to shape establishment of ASEAN in 1967, for example, which essentially divided up Southeast Asia into “communist” Indochina, “socialist” Burma, and “capitalist” ASEAN nations (Emmerson 1984). The latter, perhaps unsurprisingly, were “beneficiaries” of American military and economic assistance. In any case, Southeast Asia emerged more in relation to Anglo-American power and interests during and after WWII than to some indigenously defined and experienced regionalism. The region, produced through economic and military activities, was made all the more real and legitimized through area studies research that undertook projects on cultures, economies, and politics in largely national terms.

As the communist threat subsided there was a drastic change in the way the US engaged with nations in the region. American policies shifted from “compulsory” to “selective” engagement, and interests shifted to sites that were more consistent with neo-liberal economic development (cf. Bishop et al. 2003: 26). Aid and investment became more linked to mutually beneficial economic arrangements, and the American military bases in the Philippines withdrew. Tiger economies, with their networked nodes of capital, produc-

tion, and labour, garnered much more attention than the fledgling economies of countries such as Cambodia, which lapsed into civil war. But the 1990s also saw ASEAN accept Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar as members, and over the past decade have placed emphasis on regional economic and political cooperation both in the region and beyond. In a post-Cold War Southeast Asia that has grown more confident about East Asian futures, it would be difficult for America's desire to contain radical Islam to be realized in ways commensurate to its Cold War dominance. Although economic and military cooperation remain important to countries such as Singapore and the Philippines, and Southeast Asian nations do aim to present themselves as responding to the threat of terrorism for economic gain, reducing these examples to exemplify American hegemony in Southeast Asia is to downplay the sovereignty of local agendas and politics. It also serves to equate America's dominance in one arena with dominance in all spheres.

It is difficult to point to the limits of thinking in terms of American dominance in Southeast Asia without feeling somewhat uncomfortable. America's aggression in the Middle East seems to have revived the terminology of "imperialism" and "empire," and some suggest that recent events mark a moment in the re-territorialization of a dominant American capitalism (Smith 2001). Prior to 9/11 Southeast Asian nations would have more easily been depicted as negotiating relations with the US in a post-imperial, globalist world composed of more than one centre of power, and where events in Beijing, Tokyo, and Singapore were just as significant as those in Washington. Multilateral organizations such as APEC, transnational business networks, and the growth in intra-Asian cultural and intellectual traffic could have been marshalled to provide evidence of this claim. Since 9/11, however, states in the region have been anxiously looking at America in anticipation of an altered geopolitical map. Arrests have been made, trials are underway, and public protest has been carefully managed. Yet an emphasis on American dominance fails to appreciate the more subtle meanings that permeate a range of embedded scales—from urban spaces to the nation-state and region.

Re-mapping the Southeast Asian archipelago

It is with these ideas in mind that I return to different conceptions of Southeast Asia, ones that foreground different histories and imperatives, and place urban spaces within historical contexts that help explain Singapore's encounter with terrorism. This approach articulates the radical questioning of the ways area studies can now be conceived, given a range of critiques that have exposed the complicity of area studies with colonial, imperial, military, economic, or other ideological interests. Willem van Schendel (2002), for exam-

ple, stresses the limits to understanding Southeast Asia as a meaningful term, as this presupposes stable and bounded states. His invented region of Zomia, formed at the convergence of Central, South, East, and Southeast Asia, did not make the world geopolitical map after WWII “because it lacked strong centres of state formation, was politically ambiguous, and did not command political clout” (2002: 647). Knowledge about the region thus fell into decline, creating geographies of ignorance. Van Schendel argues that attention to borderlands can be used to reinvigorate area studies, and to “imagine other spatial configurations, such as cross-cutting areas, the worldwide honeycomb of borderlands, or the process geographies of transnational flows” (2002: 647). In other words, different geographical networks that combine political, economic, and cultural flows that fall outside bounded nation-states offer new ways to imagine “areas.” The resurgent vision of a pan-Islamic archipelago is one cross-cutting configuration.

Although reports of the history of the JI offer a variety of perspectives, it is generally alleged that the roots of the organization can be traced back to Darul Islam struggles against Dutch colonial rule in the 1940s (Republic of Singapore 2003, International Crisis Group 2002a, 2002b; Desker 2003). The Darul Islam itself was preceded by various tumultuous periods in Indonesian history, and anterior intellectual movements that had likewise struggled with ideas of Islamic nationhood (Laffan 2002). After Indonesia gained independence in 1949, the Darul Islam continued the struggle for the establishment of an Islamic state, staging a number of rebellions in the 1950s. In the 1970s and 1980s, the grouping gained new membership and became known as the JI. In the late 1970s, the Iranian Revolution and the availability of Indonesian translations of Middle Eastern writings on political Islam were stimulating unrest. In the 1980s, some JI members travelled to Afghanistan to solicit financial support for their activities and to acquire new tactics to fight the Indonesian state. An inner core of the network—including its spiritual leader Abu Bakar Bashir—also fled to Malaysia in the mid-1980s to avoid arrest by Suharto’s secular dictatorship. This latter group did not return to Indonesia until the fall of the regime in 1998, but in exile had formed networks with Malaysians that are now portrayed as aiding in the planning attacks on targets in Singapore.

This condensed history highlights the problems with assuming that Southeast Asia can be framed in a linear trajectory that details its various engagements with colonialism, postcolonialism, the Cold War, and post-Cold War neoliberalism. It is precisely this narrative that constructs Southeast Asia as a region, making the war on terrorism difficult to understand locally, as it does not contextualize historical links to the Middle East—links that have been ongoing for centuries and are responsible for bringing Islam to the region—nor does it explain cross-cutting relations across the archipelago that existed prior to, within, and beyond the colonial period. While analyses of terrorism

do scrutinize these connections, they are not historicized and/or are represented in the essentialist language of “terrorist cells.” In so doing, these representations are able to eschew “significant challenges to the political and intellectual hegemonies of the West [...] located in the Middle and Far East” (Chan/Mandaville 2003: 3). Foregrounding these connections, and placing them within a context of a volatile geopolitical order, raises different questions about terrorism and its relation to Islamic movements.

As Southeast Asian nations struggle to find an identity and place in a post-colonial, post-Cold War globalist order, there are few examples of Islamic states that have brought peace and prosperity to their populations. It is thus important to place recent regional tensions within a context of the success of those nations that have developed and adopted Confucian capitalism, such as Singapore, reformulating prior models of economic development in hybrid ways that combine capital with the nation-state within a general framework of Asian values. Moreover, in a world guided by Christian and Confucian capitalist modernities, Muslim Southeast Asia has proposed “moderate Islam,” a secular state embracing and inculcating Muslim values. This was most developed in Malaysia under Prime Minister Mahathir’s leadership, and can be placed within the broader project of re-imagining how Islam’s declined civilization might be reconstructed. Indeed, the war on terror might do well to consider enriching concepts and values from Islam, and how they might be inserted into discourses of modernity and globalization. Rather than place Southeast Asia within narratives that stress American imperialism, or conceive the region’s connections to the Middle East in essentialist terms, perhaps it is more useful to contemplate the issues raised by the hybridity of postcolonial Southeast Asian modernities—a hybridity challenged by radical Islam.

Postcolonial hauntings

Understanding fears in public spaces in Singapore, especially those not specifically besieged by terrorist attack, requires nuanced accounts of how urban spaces are being remapped in the contemporary moment. For it is the potential redrawing of national boundaries that creates apprehension in places like Holland Village, raising uncertainties concerning belonging/not-belonging in postcolonial Singapore, or the region more generally. It is this instability that troubles both the state and public, and fragmentation in countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines only helps to shape a sense of unease. Traces of prior urban conflicts, such as the bombs and riots of the 1960s, make these fears palpable. Add to this the application of Cold War government legislation—such as Internal Security and Sedition Acts—and the crea-

tion of post-9/11 policies to foster “racial harmony,” and we witness an uncanny era of Singapore’s history. It is an unstable moment that problematizes geopolitical “order,” but is not reducible to Washington’s “war on terror.” It is the return of the ghostly past, with its militant geography, that produces trepidation in the streets.

Recent events in the Middle East have inspired a host of urban conflicts around the globe. Whether these debates are about Muslim dress in public spaces in Europe, the profiling of Muslim men in US cities, or the fortification of Singapore’s expatriate enclaves, the colonial epoch has returned to haunt the present in a manner not witnessed since decolonization in the 1950s. Theorizing conflict in these spaces is not a simple task, as it entails understanding the multiple scales within which urban spaces are embedded, and the complex historical dynamics shaping conflict. As the example of Singapore shows, urban conflicts summon layers of historical divisions, connections, and affiliations that do not always include Washington at its geopolitical centre (although events in America are important). Decentring dominant narratives of “terrorism” enables a remapping of the politics of terror, taking into consideration other critical geographies and histories that profoundly shape urban tensions.

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